

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut  
Before the Housing Committee  
February 23, 2016**

**IN OPPOSITION TO  
S.B. No. 157 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING ADEQUATE AND SAFE HOUSING FOR THE  
ELDERLY AND YOUNGER PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

Good afternoon Senator Winfield, Representative Butler and members of the Housing Committee, my name is Daniela Giordano and I am the Public Policy Director with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state affiliate of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental health conditions. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups, educational programs, and advocacy for quality of life for individuals and families in the community. I am here today to testify on behalf of NAMI Connecticut to oppose *SB 157 An Act Concerning Adequate and Safe Housing for the Elderly and Younger Persons with Disabilities*.

People of all ages, abilities and family composition should be able to live in the community with a diversity of people and fellow tenants. This study bill seems to include a suggestion to potentially move toward segregating tenants based on age and health status/disability, by requiring "[r]ecommendations concerning the feasibility and means of providing comparable housing to tenants who are displaced due to units being reserved in such housing primarily for either the elderly or younger tenants with disabilities."

The stated purpose of this bill 'to ensure adequate and safe state-assisted housing for the elderly and younger persons with disabilities' seems like a good and worthy goal. However, we need to be careful that this is not done in disparate ways regarding individuals with disabilities by excluding or separating this group of people, who have been a protected class under our state constitution since 1984. "No person shall be denied the equal protection of the law nor be subjected to segregation or discrimination in the exercise or enjoyment of his or her civil or political rights because of religion, race, color, ancestry, national origin, sex or physical or mental disability."<sup>1</sup>

Excluding or limiting the number of people with disabilities who live in state-funded elderly housing would go against decades of public policy in Connecticut and violate state and federal discrimination laws. In Connecticut, elderly housing has been funded since the late 1950s. Soon after the state began these supports, the definition of "elderly" was expanded to include people with disabilities, initially as identified by Social Security and later also as identified by other federal entities.

An issue, that may not be clearly stated, that this bill seems to want to address, is potential and actual conflicts between tenants in housing complexes. Conflicts sometimes arise between people who are older and people who are younger and who happen to live with disabilities and who live in housing complexes reserved for people who are elderly and/or have disabilities. What needs to be realized

though, is that conflicts occur in all housing complexes and all neighborhoods, and that conflicts happen between individuals who are exactly the same in all respects, as well as between people with obvious and/or perceived differences. In any given group, there will be some people who are easier to get along with than others, regardless of age, sex, gender identity, familial status, race, creed, national origin, disability or any other characteristic. If issues arise between tenants in housing complexes, landlord-tenant laws already provide for ways to deal with such issues (including eviction), including in the case of a violation of lease provisions or interfering with other tenants' peaceful enjoyment of their units. Thus, including the narrow requirement in the report of "a summary of the number of negative incidents between elderly tenants and younger tenants with disabilities [...] and the number of evictions related to such incidents." is an inadequate and selective way of data collection, which may just lead to confirming pre-conceived notions. If this study were to move forward, other data would need to be collected as well to put all the data in context, for example the number of evictions for reasons other than negative incidents, negative incidents between tenants of similar background etc.

The bottom line is, separating or excluding a constitutionally protected group from equal access to safe, decent, and affordable housing is not the way to increase access to safe, decent, affordable housing for people who are elderly and people with disabilities. What we should do instead is:

- ✓ **Expand housing opportunities for all people**
- ✓ **Support expansion of support services that enable all tenants to live and use their housing in the best way possible**
- ✓ **Tie funding to improvement in properties that offers all tenants the best use of housing, for example enhanced sound proofing and better privacy**
- ✓ **Support creative ways of enhancing relationships between neighbors/tenants, including between neighbors of similar and of different backgrounds. For example, support the holding of neighborhood events or the encouragement of one-on-one relationships between neighbors.**

If this bill and study is to go forward, it would need to include the voices of all relevant stakeholders, the state agencies, housing authorities, tenants (both elderly and younger tenants with disabilities), and advocates for tenants. We also understand that the Commissioners of the Department of Housing and the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services have met to discuss how they, in collaboration with each other, can better address the needs of tenants in public housing.

Thank you for your time and attention. Please let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

Respectfully,  
Daniela Giordano, MSW  
*Public Policy Director*  
NAMI Connecticut

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<sup>i</sup> Article fifth of the amendments to the constitution, as amended by Article 21.